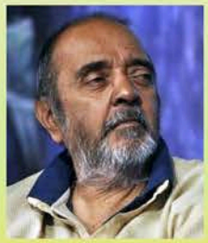

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He is now writing for a leading Hindi film magazine *Mayapuri* and at 71, he writes at least two articles every day. He hopes to write till he can no longer write.

With You, Maa Without You, Oh Maa!

ALI PETER JOHN

WITH YOU, MAA
WITHOUT YOU, OH MAA!

Ali Peter John

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DEDICATION

For all those mothers who tried to be like my mother but I am sorry to say could never be like my mother.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Hemaa Singh who introduced me to Mr. Surjit Singh because of whom one more of my favourite dreams is all set to come true, and Mr. Shankar Iyer who did all the leg work.

Ali Peter John
Mumbai
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INTRODUCTION

SORRY MAA, WORDS MY BEST FRIENDS HAVE FAILED ME WHEN I WANT TO TELL YOU HOW GRATEFUL I AM TO YOU, OH MA.

I have been trying all that I can do to describe my mother.

I have been dealing with words emotions and feelings all my life.

I've even cried out to God to help me …

But I have failed miserably to honor my mother the way she should have been honored and the way she deserves to be honored by her grateful son.

How can I ever forget every moment that I had the good fortune to spend with my mother for the first fourteen years of my life

How can I forget all that she taught me about life love and more love?

Wasn't she a much greater teacher than any of the teachers who have taught me lessons about life?

Wasn't she even greater than God who I have been believing in for as many years as I have been living?

Wasn't she more beautiful than all the woman I have seen, met lived with, try to love, understand and have failed?

Wasn't she a simple but very powerful challenge for God, the god in whom she had all the faith in and believed in, even though he did not listen to her prayers, calls and cries?

Wasn't she a mother who was a glorious example for other mothers to follow?

Wasn't she a good daughter, a great sister and a saviour for all those who needed her help and she gave help to all those who needed help without asking any questions and without thinking about whether they deserved help or not?

On August 18th last was her 101st birthday and even as I think about her life, which was cut short by her God(?)

Cut short when she was only forty-five years old and had many other ambitions and dreams to fulfill.

She went through hell to create a heaven on Earth for her sons and anyone else who crossed her path strewn with many thorns and very few roses

What all she did not face in her short life?

What all she did not face due to keep her battle with the problems of life?

Why did she not let me be a part of her world and be a part of it?

Did she not want to give her delicate son the burden of sharing endless problems?

I have never in my life seen a mother who has faced the kind of trials, tempests and tribulations created for her by both god and man?

She always worried about what I would do and how I would face the difficult and daunting games of life.

She was so anxious about me that she even wanted me to get married to "an English memsaab" who would take care of me but who was the enemy who snatched away of my mother when I needed her the most?

She was not the kind of mother who would run away from facing the realities of life, she was a mother who gave up her life to bring life into my life, then why did she have to leave me to the wild games and seasons of life, where I am still being tossed around and be made a plaything in the hands of people in this world, which is not my world, who are only interested in making this place a wilder place for me.

I can go on and on about my mother who I call out to more than I call out to God when I am in pain or busy facing one war after another.

I wish to make one more effort to sing the praises of my Maa because the more I praise her the more I want to praise her.

This little book is my offering and my prayer to my mother on her birthday.

All I know is that I have my mother in my life all the time and in every breath of my life and she will be with me till the end of my life and that is the only truth about my life I know.

There have been priests and relatives and friends who have comforted me by saying that my Maa will be born again ...

And I have tried to believe them but my heart knows that she will not come back again.

It does not matter to me whether my Maa has gone away or will come back.

All I am happy to know is that she is a part of my life and will always be.

You're grateful son, Maa

PART I: MARY, MERI MAA!

1. MARY, MERI MAA!

I am as lucky as Jesus Christ because my mother Mary was born on the same day as the mother of Christ, she was officially born on August 18 but ever since I remember I have always celebrated her birthday on the birthday of mother Mary (September 8th).

I know a little about all the sufferings mother Mary had to go through right up to following her son to Mount Calvary and seeing him being crucified but the sufferings of my humble mother Mary are no less and if there is a heaven she must be sitting next to Mother Mary, the mother of Christ trying to tell her to tell her son to take care of me.

My mother was born Piedade Cardoz in a place whose address I still remember, "Appetothu House, Kesargadi Post, Belvai Village, Mangalore, South Kanara". She was one among seven sisters and four brothers, hats off to you, my grandfather, Paul Cardoz, for performing such a feat creating a team ready to play cricket on any of the tougher games of life.

I don't know much about the early days of Mary, my mother, all I remember was that she was brought to Bombay by a man called Marshal Rego, who was set to be her godfather and who had made her sell candles at Mount Mary's Church at Bandra, a little girl running from devotee to devotee to buy her candles or she would not get a lunch or dinner she had to do this job because she had no other choice.

The only choice she had was run away from the clutches of her so-called godfather and that is what she did and managed to reach St. Catherine's Home which was a home for women who are homeless. It was here that she grew up and it was here that my then rich father found her to be the best maid to look after her house and his for children. She did her job to perfection and my great father Haroon Ali broke all the rules and traditions and took her as his third wife of whom I am the last son left to probably tell the truth about her.

Haroon Ali died leaving her a destitute with three of his sons without any provision for her or for her children. She could have given up, she could have run away, she could have even tried to commit suicide, but she did nothing like that, she was woman power, not the kind of woman power we talk about and mean very little but a woman who found the power within her to fight back and fight not only for her survival but more importantly for the survival of her three sons.

I will not go into any offer further suffering because they only gave her more strength to carry her own cross but I must tell you of the most difficult times and our life and our lives.

It was the time when she had no choice but to take up distilling illicit liquor which I believe must have been the purest and even blessed form of liquor because people from all over flooded her home just to have a taste of Mary Aunty's liquor.

The demand was so much that we had to even carry bladders of liquor to different parts of the city. She woke us up every morning wrapped rubber bladders filled with her liquor which she had distilled all night all around our bodies and covered us with the best of clothes said a prayer over us and send us out as a salesmen.

Those were the prohibition days and forget carrying liquor even being seen anywhere near liquor was considered a major crime, there were checkups at every possible point and the one place where the checking was most intense was just before the church in Mahim, the police entered every bus and checked every passenger but none of them seem to have any suspicion about us (me and my brother) and just passed us by as I kept praying and my brother kept smiling. When we reached home we were flooded with kisses and given the best of breakfast before we could get ready to go to school because whatever happened she always wanted us to go to the best of schools and get the best education and she always wanted me to be like Haroon Ali, her husband and my father, I don't know if I have fulfilled her wish but I hope I have enough time to fulfill whatever way she had for me, what greater tribute can I pay to the humble and hardworking woman who worked herself to death so that I and my brother could live?

2. WHERE HAROON MET MARY

Strange sights catch my attention in unusual places.

I had finished a long meeting which was very fruitful and all of us in the car but in a happy frame of mind.

When I suddenly saw a board on which it was written St. Catherine's Home and I as was my habit transported into another world more than 65 years ago.

My father, Haroon Ali had lived a very stormy life in different countries and in all kinds of situations and circumstances.

He had lost his first Burmese wife in childbirth when he was living a rich life in Japan, that marriage was opposed to by his family but he was always ta rebel in the family.

His business in Japan crashed and he came back to Bombay where he fell in love with Irene, an Anglo-Indian woman and had 4 children from her, Qaisar, Lulu, Alia and Zarine.

Irene turned out to be an infidel and shocked Haroon Ali when she is said to have eloped with his gardener, leaving her children behind with Haroon Ali left in a daze from which it took him days to recover.

He needed someone to take care of his four children and some friends advised him to visit the St. Catherine's Home in Andheri, a home which had to be reached only by crossing a wooden bridge with water flowing all around.

Haroon must have been desperate because he, the son of royalty reached the Home and told the head of the Home Sr. Anna Huberta about his problem, his need to have a young woman who could take care of his children.

Sr. Anna showed him some of the young women who were either orphans who were brought up in the Home or women who were abused and were never accepted by their families again.

The desperate Haroon must have had a good look at all the women and his eyes stopped looking any further when he saw Piedade Cardoz, and God alone knows why he decided that she was the woman who would give his children the care and love they needed.

Piedade was a difficult name to pronounce and so he asked Sr. Anna if he could change her name to the simple Mary and his request was granted.

Mary took charge of Haroon’s home and showered his children with the kind of love they had not received till then.

Haroon found in Mary a very special woman for whom he could take on the world and face any kind of challenges thrown at him by his family or

society.

He felt Mary was the right mother for his children who he saw grow up into healthy and caring children.

Mary's giving God our best to his children made Haroon fall for her and he went up to then Archbishop Cardinal Valerian Gracias and sought his permission to marry Mary and the Cardinal give him permission and Mary, a girl from a village in the Mangalore became Mrs Mary Haroon Ali.

Haroon saw his children from Irene grow up and be taken charge of by his rich sisters and thought it was time to revolt again, he started a family of his own with Mary taking charge of him and his family.

They had three sons, James, Peter and Roy. Haroon wanted a daughter as Mary's third child but he realised that he could not get everything he wanted and decided to take life as it came.

Time was tough, he had lost everything and ended up as a gambler and drunkard who had a family he had to take to a remote village and live in a hut which was a cultural, religious and physical shock for him.

Mary however was unwilling to buckle down and worked very hard to bring up the three sons, life became more difficult for Mary when Haroon suddenly died and his family put her on some kind of pension by giving her 70 rupees every month for which she had to travel to Bandra Station where Sameena, one of his sisters would come with her driver Mustafa who would hand over the money to my mother who had still to learn how to protest, it was something that was not talked to her at St. Catherine's Home.

She however knew that she would not be able to manage life for her three sons with only 70 rupees and one of her Godfathers from Mangalore taught her how to distill liquor and sell the liquor to make a better living.

It was certainly not a better living at a time when prohibition of liquor with a rule that had to be followed but she carried on her business with Roy being her chief assistant and Peter being the keeper of accounts of men who paid her the money on a monthly basis.

Life was very good and Mary learned how to deal with the police on one side and her rivals and competitors on the other, but she had carry on to give her sons a good life and a good education and she never gave up till her elder son James ran away from home and joined the Navy without letting her know and she lived the brave live all through the day and cried over James all night till she was diagnosed with high blood pressure.

To add to her own misery and the misery of her sons Peter and Roy, she took to drinking heavily herself and the neighbors who were once dead scared of her know openly abused her or made fun of her which she could not take.

Her sons were playing cricket one Sunday and when they came home for lunch she was fast asleep and the sons had to drink brandy to keep

hunger away, the sons came home after the game of cricket and she was frothing at the mouth, Peter had to call the Parish Priest who had spent several evenings feasting on her liquor and very good food and the b...e of a priest asked Peter to rush her to Sion hospital and said "God will bring your mother back in all her glory tomorrow".

That tomorrow did not come, Mary was declared dead at 1:40 on November 29, 1965, the same priest made an issue of her name and did not want Peter to paint her name as Mary Ali on her coffin and suggested rather ordered him to write her name as Mary John, that was the biggest shock for both her sons. Peter continue studying before Roy became a terror in the area, a young man even the police were scared of.

There must have been hundreds of people Mary had helped during her lifetime but none of those people turned up at her funeral which included in her own brothers and sisters, but a factory called Camlin declared a half-holiday for all the workers to say goodbye to a woman who was considered good-for-nothing once, but everyone and everything and who is one woman anyone may forget but Peter will never because he knows what her hell her mother had to go through to create a heaven for him his brother and so many who did not deserve her goodness.

Thank you, St. Catherine's Home for the giving Haroon Ali a wife in the true sense and for giving Peter a no one in the world can find now or anytime in the times to come.

3. MY MOTHER WAS THE FIRST FEMINIST I KNEW

Mary Cardoz was an uneducated girl from Moodbidri in Mangalore who was forced to come to Bombay when she was hardly ten or twelve years old.

A relative in Bombay forced her to sell candles at the Mount Mary fair held every year for which she was given two meals a day.

The same relative forced her to join an orphanage telling the nuns that she had nobody when the truth was that she had seven sisters and four brothers.

It was at the orphanage that she met Mr. Haroon Ali, a close one of the Nizam of Hyderabad who had two failed marriages behind him and four children to be taken care of, he asked the nuns if he could take my mother as a caretaker for his children, they agreed.

She spent all her time looking after Haroon Ali's children who was so impressed with her dedication that he broke all the rules and traditions and married her, they had three sons (I am the only one alive).

My father died when I was seven and my mother was left alone with her three sons, she could not take up any job and learnt the art of distilling homemade liquor to give herself and her three sons good education and livelihood.

They were thrown out of one but she built her own hut in a jungle where no human beings had lived before and soon there were many other people who made that jungle their home.

She was a fighter who could take on any challenges and fight any kind of people, she fought policeman, she entered homes where men beat up their wives and ill-treated children.

She helped all those who were in need and saw that children were sent to school and woman did not have to 'beg' for a living and be slaves of their husbands.

She was the first woman who could fire the likes of local "Patel", the rich and cunning and cruel men, she made sure that whatever money she made was also used for the betterment of others and the church (she was a very firm believer in Jesus Christ, but respected people of all religions alike without being taught or told to.

She literally fought some of her cases o her own and when a lawyer called Patankar tried to fleece her, she openly thrashed her in the compound of the Andheri court.

Her bold and brave deeds made her home some kind of a leader in the

area where she lived but she did what she did and no one else could do.

She instilled some of the best values in her sons and saw that her sons never went wrong and when the sons did go wrong she taught them lessons that would last them all their life.

My greatest regret in life is losing her at a time when I needed her the most, I was fourteen and in the 10th standard when she suddenly died when she was only forty-five and she felt me to face the wild winds of life which I have been doing for the last 55 years all because of her blessings and her teachings which no Guru, Pope or Pandit can teach me.

I miss her every day and I have not forgotten her for the single moment of my life.

4. YOU WERE MORE THAN A MOTHER, DEAR MOTHER

I had never seen a mother building a house for the three sons in a jungle out of cow dung, mud bamboo sticks and dry grass with used doors and holes in the walls as windows.

I had never seen a mother distilling liquor and sitting before the fire for hours waiting for the drops of liquor fall into a bottle and scared of the police raiding her house and arresting her.

I have never seen a mother spending her day looking after her three sons and also looking after her business selling liquor to customers who were mostly male and also cooking and doing all the other work a woman does to keep her little family going.

I have never seen a woman who was illiterate sending her sons to the best convent schools in the area and giving them the best education and making them grow into young men for the future.

I had never seen a mother whose elder son had run away from home to join the Indian Navy and had gone missing during the Indo-Pak war of 1965 and had faith in her God that her son would be found and suffered silently till he was found.

I had never seen a mother praying to her God in a language (English) which she had only heard and never read or written and was sure that her God would listen to her prayers.

I had never seen a mother who was also a mother to her pet dogs, Prince and Q who was served the same food she served her sons and the dogs were so faithful to her that she neighbours talked about "Mary Aunty's dogs who are as well-behaved as her sons".

I had never seen a mother who went into the homes where women were beaten up and ill-treated by their husbands other men and their families and made them see reason, even if it meant raising a hand against the men protect the women.

I had never seen a mother who helped up neighbors and who had established her six sisters and two brothers and their families by finding them jobs in different parts of Bombay.

I had never seen a mother who had heard stories of orphan girls whom she made arrangements to send it to an orphanage which was the best in the suburbs and saw to it that the girls grew up, got married in good families even got good jobs.

I had seen my first social activist, social worker and a crusader for the dignity of women and children in my mother.

I had seen the first mother who taught her sons how not to tolerate any kind of humility or being beaten up by stronger and richer boys and how she admonished her sons if they came home crying after being beaten up by someone and said "you are not a coward you are the son of Mary, go and find your revenge if you are right then come home to me".

I had never seen a mother and a wife fight her best battle when her one-time rich husband Haroon Ali had died suddenly and she had to make other arrangements for his funeral, he wanted to be converted and my illiterate, poor mother not only saw that Haroon Ali was converted and had a new name John but gotten buried in a Christian Cemetery with the entire village and his rich Muslim relatives and friends attending a Christian funeral for the first time.

I had never seen a mother who cared for his son (me) so much that she would she worried herself about what would happen to me if she died and even had plans to get me married when I was eighteen …..

But alas it was a dream she could not fulfill in our life time and life has been tossing me around like a toy for the last 55 years after she left me without giving me or anyone trouble.

I have been looking for her in other women and other mothers, it is a phenomenon not many can understand, but what does the son who has never really known what the love and power of a mother is do? The only satisfaction I have is that I named the house she had built with her own hands as " M Ali's House", the M standing for Mary, the mother who I cannot find in any other mother not even in the mother of God who was also called Mary.

5. MY MOTHER, MY WORLD

The holy Ali family continue to take care(!) of Mary and her sons

With that monthly "pension" of rupees 70 only

How could Mary manage the home and here three growing up sons?

The Royal holy Family found no reason no time to think

In their palaces on Pali Hill

There were more misery to come for the large hearted (that is what they called her) land lady hell, our home on earth, decided to demolish hell

To build a new home in honor of her husband, Matthew

Who had died just two months before Haroon Ali died

Incidentally the land lady's husband and Haroon Ali were good friends and great drinking partners

Matthew died on May 18, 1959 and Haroon Ali followed on July 23, the same year

They kept the promise they had made to each other

The lived like friends and died like friends but

The landlady didn't even think once of where Mary, her dear friend and her three little sons would go

She just demolished hell

And left us literally in the open, homeless and hopeless

Now we did not have even the hell we had lived in

Then Mary, my mummy, gathered courage

Went to a place surrounded by a huge boulders and bought a piece of land from a man called Latif Abdul Cyclewallah

Adversity had given Mary, my mummy, extraordinary courage

She hired a few working hands and joined them in moving the boulders

What started after the boulders were moved is a story of another "Mother India". She borrowed some money from a friend who cared and started building her own home with her own hands

She and some villagers slogged day and night and built a house with bamboo sticks, cow dung, mud and hay

We had a roof to hide our heads at last

She moved into her house and people marvelled at this one woman miracle

Soon many others followed her example and build similar houses

The barren land with boulders had changed into a heaven for the homeless and within no time the entire land was covered by little houses like Mary's house

And she kept improving on it

With a garden growing her own vegetables and fruits
She was "Mary Aunty", a name to respect now
But she had to make a living too
How could she and her three sons live on rupees 70 only?
The prices were rising and so were our needs
She thought of ways and then thought of one way
She decided to run her own "industry"!
She decided to distill country liquor
There were others who were already in the competition
She joined the competition with courage, she had no other way out, we had to survive
She learned the "art" of distilling liquor
The buying of jaggery ("gud") and white slab of a chemical called "navsaghar[1]"
It was the "thing" that inspired intoxication
She bought a number of pots in which the jaggery ("gud") and "navsaghar" were mixed and left to ferment in holes dug and covered with our own hands
The next morning the fermented blend was poured into a drum
A huge aluminium vessel with water was placed on it and dry wood was set on fire
A steel metal plate was placed inside the drum with a tube attached to it
Minutes later the magic worked
Drop by drop the distilled liquor fell into the bottle and then bottle after bottle
My little brother, Roy, helped her in the distilling process
While I kept watch for the police rounds and police raids which were common
It was illicit business after all
Soon "Mary Aunty" and her business flourished and was the best business in the village
The police came, they raided her house regularly but it was all a show
They called her "aai" (mother), "tai" (sister) and even "devi" (Goddess)
All they wanted her "aasirwad", some money and "hafta"
They warned her in advance when they would raid her house
They begged of her to give them a case to prove their "hoshiari" to their "sahibs"
Cases were filed against her, cases came up for hearing in dark and dingy courts
But the police always saw that "Mary Aunty" came out free, not guilty

1 This chemical is called Naushaadar in Hindi/Urdu, is Ammonium Chloride, known to be an ingredient in home-made wines-Ed.

She used to keep them happy, was a guest at their children's birthday parties and all their festivals

But "Mary Aunty's" stuff was the best, her customer said

Hordes of men walked in and out of her house

She was the "boss", I was her accountant and my little brother Roy her "security guard"

"Mary Aunty" prospered, it was hard and risky work but there was good money too

Good clothes, good food, good birthday parties and great festivals to celebrate

And soon a major battle started

The other aunties in the business were not happy with her

Their envy reached new depths when she became and "exporter"

When her stuff was wanted even in high places all over the city because she believed in quality

We were carriers, carried the stuff in our school bags

We carried the stuff in well washed rubber bladders and tubes wrapped all our bodies

And went various places after she prayed for our safety to all the Gods in the world

Her prayers were always heard or so it seemed

We never got caught, were not even looked at with suspicion

We were very good at our jobs and she looked after us with greater care of every time we returned safely

She celebrated our birthdays like weddings and fed hundreds of the poor and donated large sums of money to orphanages

The neighbors couldn't take this widow's success

They started all kinds of attacks on her

They even started attack on her character

They spread false stories about her

They paid the police to raid her house almost everyday

we were too young but my little brother was an angry little boy

He wanted to kill all of them, he always said

She stopped him from going wild but I knew he was going wild for the first time

When he almost killed a neighbour's son for saying something nasty about "mummy"

Boys who were double his age and even stronger scattered as soon as he walked the streets

There was something about his fists, they were the fists of sheer fury

He could knock out a six-footer with just one jab of his fist

But the attacks on "Mary Aunty" continued and I could see her crumble

She cut down on her "business" and her customers were pained

She told them she could not take the taunts and threats but she was a fighter still

6. MARY ALI'S MIND-BLOWING FACTORY

She was a widow at 35, with her three little sons to look after. And to add to her misery her dear friend Bridgette who was also her landlady asked her to vacate the hut in which she was living

She was left with no house

But she was not the kind of woman to give up hope

She went into the nearby jungle bought a piece of land after paying a sum of 25 rupees

And she started building her own dream house

I was 8 years old then, but I remember how she built her house on her own with the help of some of the villagers

She had to lift heavy stones and cut all the shrubs and wild weeds to make way for the ground on which she would build a house

She had the foundation of her house made of mud and cow dung, I kept looking at the wonders she kept working

She built the walls of the house with a blend of cow dung mud and old bamboo sticks, all put in their places with our own hands

She did not rest till she had a roof made of dried grass, old and broken tiles, branches of trees and dry leaves and Mary Ali's house for her sons was ready

Little did she know that her house was going to lead the way to a colony of houses to come

She had built our house but what would she do to keep her little family going without starving?

She had to find a way of making a living

She did not want to be an aayah or a domestic help because she had seen how her own sisters who were working in such jobs were treated by their employers

She was still looking for some kind of work in which she could make some money for the family

It was at this time that her "Godfather" Mr Marshal Rego met her and gave her the idea of distilling illicit liquor

It was not going to be easy but she was a dare devil who could build our own house all by herself so what was difficult in distilling liquor

She decided to start our "factory" of manufacturing Liquor on a small scale

I used to watch her going about her new found business

She had bricks which she placed in four corners

On the these bricks, she placed a drum on which she placed a huge

stainless steel "handi" (utensil) filled with water

In the drum was a concoction of a liquid which was made of jaggery ("gud") mixed with a white powder which was known as "navsaghar" which I later came to know about the chemical which created intoxication

Inside the drum was a small metal plate which was connected to a rubber pipe, my mother burnt a fire over the bricks and her "factory" started once the drops of liquor started flowing down through the rubber pipe and into a waiting bottle

It took almost an hour for one bottle to be full as my mother kept watching the drops of liquid flowing

There were at least six bottles that were filled in one "shift" of her distilling process

My younger brother, Roy worked as an assistant during the entire "shift" and I will the "security" whose job was to keep an eye on the movements of the police (those were prohibition days and if you are caught with even a glass of liquor you could be sent to jail)

Mary Ali's "factory" had started flashing and her business started expanding

Her liquor was considered to be the best in the village and word of her serving the best country liquor spread all over

Soon, we had hundreds of workers coming to Mary Ali House to feast on her liquor and we were rich with all the money we needed to live a good life and go to the best schools

The liquor that she distilled had become very popular and she had customers in different parts of the city

My brother and me were also her "salesmen" who carried her liquor from our house to the different customers in the city

She woke us up at 5 O'clock in the morning, gave us a bath, we prayed together and she then wrapped our bodies with rubber bladders and tubes all filled with different kinds of liquor (saada, naarangi, jaamun and mixed fruit)

We had to cross several "prohibition naakas" where there was a threat of our being arrested and if we were, we could be sent to the Children's Home which was a jail for my minors, but we were saved every time which I now believe was it result of my mother's constant prayers

When we returned home successfully, my mother gave us the best food and it was a feast for us all through the day

My brother was promoted as the "chief operator" of Mary Ali factory and I was promoted as the "accountant" and also as the "legal advisor" who guided the lawyers who defended Mary Ali whenever she was arrested

And life continued for us till my mother suddenly died

7. MARY AUNTIE 'DAARUWALI'

My “Daddy” had died and left us all in the dark, he had gone bankrupt a long time ago and I have still to know how many my mother managed the house, it was an aunt who was younger sister of my father who had a palace of a house on the posh Pali Hill who decided to provide my mother with 70 rupees to manage our family for which she had to travel to Bandra station where that aunt placed the money in my mother's palms and drove away without getting to ask how she managed her family. I even at that young age often wondered why my mother was never invited to that aunt’s bungalow or to any of the rich relatives of my father, it was only years later that I realized that my mother was a woman whose sisters worked as maids in different rich homes all over Bombay, how could they allow this poor woman into their houses, wouldn’t she ruin the carpets from Kashmir and the furniture from different parts of the world

8. MARY AUNTIE'S BENCH (BAANKDAA)

Her business was doing very well.

One morning when there were not many customers she thought of an idea and called Ram Avatar, the village carpenter and asked him to make a broad bench on which she could make her customers sit, the bench or baankadaa as it was called was ready within 24 hours and the customers who used to stand and gulp down their glasses of liquor were very happy with Mary Ali's decision to give them a decent place to sit

The bench soon became very popular as "Mary Aunty's baankdaa" all over the village

Soon the bench was wanted at all weddings, birthday parties as religious ceremonies of people belonging to any religion

Then, the bench was discovered as a very good place to place the coffins of the dead, especially among the Christians and I don't know how many bodies in their coffins must have had their last resting place on this bench which I think was in a very good shape, strong and also very "handsome"

And little did Mary Ali know that one day her own coffin would be placed on that bench or people who pay their respects before she was taken to the crematory, I am sure, Mary Ali, my mother would never have imagined that the bench she had got made was going to be known as a celebrity bench wanted by one and all

When we left our house my brother and I had a heated argument on whether we should take the bench with us or not, but my brother won his argument and said it would be too inconvenient and out of place in a one room flat and gave away the bench to one of the neighbors

And I can still not forget that bench which was so much like a symbol of secularism and democracy more than any what they mean in these times

9. MARY'S CHRISTMAS

Those days the evenings were really very cold, those days the life we lived was a life without any worry because we had Mary, our mother by our side through good times and bad times

Christmas was very special feast for her because it was the birthday of her Jesus

The preparations began a month before the "birth" of Christ whether she had money or not, she created money from nowhere as I believed

She celebrated my birthday with a feast for the entire village, then how do you think she would celebrate the birthday for her Jesus?

She got all the essentials needed to make all the best sweets and especially the Christmas cake when she begged herself

On the evening before midnight when Jesus was to be born, she put us to sleep at 7 in the evening so that we could wake up in time to attend midnight mass

Every Christmas she got new clothes made for us and paid special attention to the colorful ties we wore for the birthday of her Jesus

I remember how she made it a point to see that I had a tie with a cat on it

It was killing cold when we headed for church and we got all the warmth from the "bhatti" (brick kiln)

I don't remember what any of the priest said during all these years that followed and kept celebrating Christmas the Mary Ali Christmas way

Christmas at M Ali's House (the name given to our jhopda by me in honor of my mother) continued for the next 10 days and Mary's Christmas was Christmas for everyone, big or small, the lowest classes and those who didn't know the importance of the birthday of Jesus

And then one day lightning struck and Mary went away to go to Jesus celebrate his birthday

And Christmas has never been the same for me again

DEAR MOTHER

You never gave me a chance to know what a mother really means, but the little that I knew about you is enough to let me know what a mother could be, especially in today's world where sons and daughters are waiting for their mothers to die merely to get the space she occupied in the house, when a son kills his mother for a few rupees to buy him his liquor, when an intelligent son gets his mother to put her thumb impression on papers

which make her a nobody, when sons use their old mother to beg in the streets and when sons and daughters get together to wait for a chance to throw mother's into homes for the aged

How I wish I could know the pain you went through even though you were with me only for 14 years!

PART II: UNUSUAL STORY OF MARY ALI

1. A BLESSING IS BORN

For the first ten years of my life I believed, I felt, I thought and I believed more in my mother than God

I knew she was a fairy not from heaven but from some corner of the world where she was born alone

It was only after I was in my 10th standard in school that I came to know the truth about my mother being like any other mother, but was still so very different from all the other mothers are seen and know until then ...

Yes, my mother was born like any other mother in a village called Moodbiri in Mangalore (now known as Mangaluru) in South Canara (now known as Karnatka)

She was born as the ninth child of Mr. Paul Cardoza and Anne and had her 6 other sisters and four brothers

It was a life like a dream with no worries whatsoever

Her father had several fields and grew vegetables, fruits and had little rivers from which they could catch fish whenever they wanted and even have a swim

My mother was the bravest of all and children and was known as the fearless Piedade

The church was a long distance away from my grandfather's house (Appethotu House, meaning mother's house), but she walked to the church every Saturday evening to make her confession, (what since she must have committed I still find it difficult even to imagine after 101 years of her life)

On Sunday morning she walked back to the church to attend mass at the Alangaar Church

She came back home to help her father and her brothers in the fields and helped her aunts in the large common kitchen for the entire family

Life was a routine exercise, but my mother was known to make the best out of life

2. A FLOWER IN THE FIELDS

She was not a naughty or a wild child, but she was as naughty or innocent as any other girl of her age

She played and romped in the field

She ran after colorful butterflies and dragon flies, held them in her little fingers and when she saw them struggling for life, she let them go and clapped her hands with joy, she even revelled in running after small and big snakes and sometimes even held a live snake in her hands and played with it

Climbing the tallest and dangerous trees came to her naturally

She dived and jumped into every little pond, well and river and came up with a treasure of fish which would be the lunch and dinner for the family

Was she growing into a tomboy as people in the city called girls who do the kind of things and perform the feat which men did not dare to perform?

3. FLYING AWAY

All the other daughters of Paul and Anne were gradually married off, none of them were educated and it seemed like they were only born to grow up, get married and become mothers of countless children

But my mother did not want to follow in their footsteps and dreamt of flying away to some other place where life could be better, she felt

It was this ambition and dream of a young girl that drew the attention of an "uncle" named Marshal Rego who had settled down in Bombay, he attracted the 12 year old girl with his tall talk of dream life in the city

And the girl followed the "uncle" to Bombay which was like an unknown and unbelievable place for her young mind to comprehend

But, little did she know that the "uncle" was going to make her work like a slave in his house

She lived with his "uncle" and his family for a year and then fled to the house of another "uncle" who she was happy to know was from the same village in Mangalore where she had spent her childhood

She was treated well for some time by this "uncle" who finally showed her his true colors and made her sell candles and flowers at different churches like the Mount Mary's Church in Bandra and the Mother of Perpetual Succour Church at Mahim. Her job was to beg and plead of them to buy her candles and flowers because otherwise our uncle would not give her lunch or tea or dinner

The "uncle" kept abusing, torturing and humiliating her till she ran away from his house without letting her "uncle" know and without knowing where she was going

4. MOTHERS AND 'MOTHERS'

She was lucky she found a few women who took her to the house of one of them

They asked her where her parents were and whether she had any brothers and sisters

She told them in Konkani, which was the only language she knew that she had left all of them in her village in Mangalore

The woman kept her in the house of one of them for a few days

And treated her well, gave her some good food and also bought her a few new dresses and she was happy and called the group of women "MAI" (Mother)

But happiness lasted only a few days. One morning three of the woman got her dressed in her best frock

She did not know where they were taking her till she found herself in front of a home for orphans and helpless young women

And she saw the first signs of the life that she would have to live for a long time

And what she feared came true when the woman got her admitted in the house as the young woman who had no home and no family in the city

The home was called St. Catherine's Home and her name was entered as Piedade with her age with her name entered as 14

It was the beginning of a new life for the girl who had run away from home in Appethotu House n Belvai village in Mangalore

5. LIFE AT ST. CATHERINE'S HOME

Piedade had lived for the past few months in the Home like she was living in a dream house

She was amused and baffled by the nuns in long dresses with huge crucifixes around their necks and a chain of beads around their waists

They were the heads of different departments in the Home, with Sr. Anna Huberta, a Spanish nun as the Mother Superior of the Home, with 7several other nuns who are mostly from Mangalore, Goa and Kerala

But she got her first shock when she saw how the breakfast served to the nuns was very different and of a better quality than the breakfast served to girls like her

Her shock turned into painful memories when she saw that lunch and dinner served to the girls was only a plate of wild rice (ukda chawal) with just a little salt and the side of the tin plate and a large green chilly in the center of the plate

She could not believe that the saintly none could be so cruel to girls like her

She even found babies in cradles being fed with the same kind of food that babies could not eat or swallow

She had seen better food in her house in a village and started missing the food she once used to have with our grandfather, her sisters her brothers and their children

She thought of running away from Home but where would she go in the city about which she knew nothing and where she did not know anybody?

6. PIEDADE - THE FAVOURITE ONE

Life had taught her enough lessons in a very short time

And one of the first of the girls to learn how to adjust with the circumstances and she gradually became the favorite of the nuns the Marys who wore white sarees, and covered their heads with a white veil, these women were not nuns but women who dedicated their lives to God and never got married

Piedade had soon started learning to pray in English and she memorized all the important English players without understanding a word about what she was telling God and she stood first in her catechism classes and received a prize of a white rosary which was presented to her by Sr. Anna Huberta, which made her study the more prayers in English and still not understanding it word of what she was saying or praying

And life continued for Piedade, with praying in English, helping the Marys in the large kitchen, making tea for hundreds of girls, serving the tea and then praying with a group of young women, having her dinner of boiled rice and a chilly and then going to bed to dream of a better tomorrow

7. FRIENDS TILL THE END

Piedade had made many friends in the Home

But she had three good friends, Mary Melda, Mary Zita

And Catherine, but her best friend was Catherine

They shared whatever they ate or drank and even shared clothes

Catherine was destined to be Piedade's friend till the last day and moment of Piedade's life

8. A PRINCE CAME RIDING

The Home gave the girls the freedom to marry any man they liked

A man called Haroon Ali came in a car to Catherine's Home

He was told that the home allowed its girl to choose the man of their lives

Haroon Ali was the father of four children and his wife had deserted him and his children

He told the Mother Superior that he wanted a young woman to look after his four children

The Mother Superior presented Piedade before him

And he had one look at me and decided to take her home with him

Piedade was both happy and sad, happy because she was going to enter a new world and sad because she would be leaving the Home where she had so many friends

Life was all set to take a new turn in her life

9. HER FIRST TASTE OF FREEDOM

The first few days in Haroon Ali's house was like going to school for Piedade

She was taught by Haroon Ali himself about to keep the house clean and tidy and especially to take care of his books of which he had plenty

She was then taught how to keep the children well dressed before going to school

And she was also trained to cook by Haroon Ali

Most of the dishes were alien to her, but she was a quick learner and Haroon Ali was very happy with her progress

She however had a strange problem, she had bought a small frame of Jesus Christ and a rosary and did not know where to pray

Haroon Ali saw her praying in the kitchen one day and told her not to feel scared to play anywhere in his house

She felt totally relieved and felt at home even though she was aware that she was only a maid in the family

It took her very little time to be accepted and respected by Haroon Ali's children who were happy to have her in there

Haroon Ali one day told her that he had found it difficult to pronounce her name and asked her if she would mind if he called her Mary

She felt very happy with a new name and decided that she would do anything possible to keep Haroon Ali and his children happy as long as she was there

10. LIFE WITH HAROON ALI

Haroon Ali had trained her in how to look after his house and his children

There was one son, Qaisar and three daughters Lulu, Aalu and Zarine

They went to the best schools and Piedade was to look after all their needs till they went to school and within no time she proved to Haroon Ali that he had made the right choice

Within a few years Piedade had become one with the family and Haroon Ali thanked the Mother Superior of Catherine's Home for giving him such a precious gift

And life continued with Haroon Ali as the head. Piedade who was everything in the house and the four children

11. LOVE GROWS AND GLOWS

She had now made a place in the hearts of everyone in Haroon Ali's home

All the four children of Haroon Ali ware very fond of her and she treated them like a mother

Haroon Ali used to keep watching the way she behaved and treated her children, a quality he did not see in his wife who was the mother of his children

His own loneliness was eating into him and he needed to take a decision that would do good to his family

He decided to marry her, but it was not too easy as she was a Christian and he was a Muslim

But Haroon Ali broke all barriers and approached the Cardinal of Bombay to seek his permission to marry the maid of the house, Mary

And Haroon Ali finally married for better or for worse

He had given Mary the permission to follow her own faith and he practiced a faith that was no faith and life continued till ...

12. A NEW JOURNEY BEGINS

Haroon Ali lived life recklessly

He had a passion for gambling, drinking and smoking and the kind of life gradually lead to his downfall

He kept changing one house after another, till he faced serious financial problem, but Mary stood by him in all his ups and downs and continued to take care of his four children, the son joined the Indian Air Force, two of his daughters got married and one went missing, god alone knows where

But Mary kept walking by Haroon Ali's side and he knew that as long as she was with him he had nothing to fear or worry

A time came when he had to live in a slum in a hut-like house which was surrounded by all kinds of animals including pigs which he kept far away from because of his basic Muslim belief that pigs were buraa janwar, his condition had turned so bad that he used to tell Mary that he was going to "office" and Mary would pack his lunch for him, but he came home drunk every day and at times men carried him home because he was so drunk that he could not walk or even know the direction to his own house, he had become a nuisance for everyone but not for Mary who took care of him like a good wife

Life was getting worse ...

13. MARY AND HER THREE SONS

For all his bungalows and all his riches Haroon Ali had landed in trouble when he found it difficult to support Mary and her three sons, Robin, me and my younger brother Roy

It was difficult to make two ends meet but Mary had the courage and the confidence to see that our family lacked nothing

She had taken up different kinds of jobs without losing her dignity and made enough money to keep her children and her husband going

She had got her sons admitted to the best of convent schools in the area and made sure that her sons received the best kind of education like the sons of Haroon Ali's family (they were all rich people who live in bungalows on Pali Hill and in the neighborhood of Raj Kapoor's Cottage and studio)

Haroon Ali suddenly died one morning and Mary was left alone with her three sons and how she managed to build our own house of bamboo sticks, cow dung and mud is a story of more than any Mother India

She had taken to distilling illicit liquor which was both a risky and dicey business but she did it for her sons and she was known as "Mary Bai" or Mary Aunty" and was known in different parts of Bombay and she was also known among policemen, local politicians and Christian priests, Hindu pandits and Muslim mullahs and this was at a time when there was no talk of secularism and other such sanctimonious talks

She had some of the biggest parties to celebrate every festival of any community, but her best celebration was when she celebrated my birthday when she had a band playing the best songs in Hindi and Konkani and Marathi and with the best food which was served to the entire village which was personally invited by her

My elder brother ran away from home and it was during the war of 1965 and Mary was informed about his being found in an Air Force Base in Jodhpur and before he could be found, he was out of the Air Force and had joined the Navy (or was it the other way around?) and then he was not found for a long time and Mary fell sick very often and had grown into a patient who has several elements, high blood pressure being the one condition which made her grow weak with every passing day, she had developed a red clot in one of her eyes and she was no longer the same Mary who could fight five men at a time and who used to enter the houses of people where women were beaten up by their husbands or humiliated in any way

14. MARY AND ME

They called Mary my mother, but she was more than a mother to me, I would have loved to call her my God at that time, but if I said anything like that, I knew she would be boycotted (ostracized) from my Christian Community. But she was good for me which she continued to be and will be

She took special care of me because she felt that I would not be able to face the challenges of life, she could punish anyone but she never punished me and I never gave her a chance to punish me and she used to say,

> **"Mere baaki do bete kuch bhi karke jee lenge, lekin mujheiss ladke ki fikr hai, kya karega pata nahin mere jaane ke baad"**

My younger brother turned out to be just like Mary, he was never scared of anyone, not even of the most poisonous snakes which he caught alive with his hands and pulled out their venom (poison) with his own bare hands and he could knock out tall and hefty men with just the show of his fist ...

Mary continued to grow weaker, she gave up distilling liquor, her neighborhoods who were always jealous of her, kept troubling her in worser ways, and in the same old same bold woman, Mary was laid down in bed with her eyes looking at a roof which she had built and rebuilt several times

Mary was worried about her pet dogs Prince and "Q" who she had brought up just like she had brought up her sons, she would sometimes not cook for my brother and me but she made sure that she had something to eat for Prince and "Q"

15. AND THEN MARY LEFT, AND WHAT A WAY SHE LEFT

I was 14 and my brother Roy was 11, we played Cricket more than we studied, which was something Mary did not like but she could forget and forgive whatever she do not like when it came to our sons.

That morning she told us that she wanted to rest and she was not to be disturbed and she said,

"Agar tumne mujhe jagaaya, main bahut maaroongi".

I was surprised because she had never used a line like this while talking to her sons.

It was a break during our cricket match and we came back home hoping that Mary, my mother would have made some lunch for us, but when we reached home she was sleeping and we went back to the cricket field and continue playing. We won that match.

And when we came back home again, Mary, my mother was unconscious and foaming at the mouth and when I informed our neighbors, they panicked and called the Christian priest and I didn't know what was going on, they then called our family doctor who asked me to rush her to the Sion Municipal Hospital.

I, a 14 year old boy was asked to call for an ambulance and she was taken to the hospital where they placed her on the ground among many of the female patients, till 2 a.m. in the morning no doctor or nurse attended on her and at 3 a.m. two young doctors(?) came to me and asked me, "Tumhara koi nazdeeki rishtedaar ho to bula lo unko". I did not know what he meant but I kept waiting outside on the road and hoping that all would be well and I would take Mary, my mother home the next morning.

But nothing like that happened. I kept walking in and out of that floor and at 1:40 that afternoon two men in white came to where she was lying and pulled a white bed sheet or her and told me, "Woh to gayi". My world crumbled around me and from that moment till she was buried I did not cry.

How could I cry when I had suddenly to carry the responsibilities of arranging a proper funeral for her and deal with money-hungry priests who I later new we're dealing with graves and even promising people to send the dead to heaven, and many other men and women for whom my mother's funeral was another way of making a living.

There were my mother's own sisters and other real and unreal aunts

who kept saying, “dekho who ladka, uski ma mar gayi, phir bhi rota nahin”.

How could I cry when all the tears in my eyes had dried up the moment those two men pulled that white that sheet over her?

I did not cry when she died because I just couldn't cry and now for the last 56 years, I have only been crying for Mary, my Maa and how I miss her every moment of my life, life without Mary, my mother has gone on but what a painful life it has been without Mary, my Maa!

AND THE UNBELIEVABLE STORY OF MARY MY MOTHER WILL CONTINUE AS LONG AS I LIVE.

PART III. CODA

I. THANK YOU "MAA", FOR INTRODUCING ME TO THE WORLD ... AND CINEMA

I'm not only sure, but very sure that if my mother was educated she would have made a better leader than any of the leaders we have today who are too busy to lead us nowhere or an administrator better than many of the administrators who are more of lackeys of the leader and happily destroying the country or any of the men and women at the top who are playing havoc with India since the last 71 years. She had proved her mettle even when she was living in Kondivita, the village where she spent all her life and brought up her three sons which included me

How I miss you "Maa" today so many years later when I have grown older than you were when you left me alone to grapple with this world!

My mother had in a way prepared me to face the challenges awaiting me before I could be 15 . And one of the fields in which she literally went out of her way and train me was in the field of cinema without knowing that cinema was going to be my way of earning my bread and sometimes my butter and whatever name and reputation I have today

Cinema was almost unknown to Kondivita, the village I started Living when I was only three years old with my senses already working over time

The first time I could sense the impact of Hindi Cinema in my village was when there was an epidemic of smallpox and people were dying "like rats" like the people in the village said. There were vaccination vans which came into the village and they had a novel way of attracting the villagers and especially children to the events which played popular Hindi film songs like "Man dole mera tan dole" and "Zara samne to ao chhaliye" then caught people and children and forcibly vaccinated them

The epidemic got over after months and after it had claimed several lives (I wish I could say the same about the pandemic we are going through today). I have a strong feeling that my mother and her three sons survived a smallpox epidemic because my father took a decision to send us off to Mangalore, my mother's native place, we came back to a changed Kondivita and one big change was that there were many people who lived in shanties and were working in different capacities in the film studios that had come up in and around the suburb of Andheri

It was the smart men and women who had made a strong impact on the original inhabitants of Kondivita, who started treating them like aliens who had come from some other planet. The smart people tried all the ways to win the hearts of the innocent and illiterate villagers and singing songs from

Hindi films and dancing to them and wearing fancy and colorful clothes was one of these strong points. They went several steps ahead when they had their parties and invited their friends from "abroad" which gave the villagers whose ancestors were living there for hundreds of years and had their permanent homes a complex. The influence of these aliens from the world of Hindi film was so strong that girls from the village fell in love with these aliens and even eloped with them in many cases even married them without knowing that they were asking for an uncertain future

Kondivita was changing colors for the first time, maybe in a thousand years it was otherwise known as a tiny village in between the two thousand-year-old Mahakali Caves and the 1000 year old St. John the Baptist Church and with the age-old Warli village Warli tribe in between

The aliens found a new way of capturing the imagination of the people of Kondivita. Some men would get some used prints of old films and screened them on white bed sheets and sometimes on real but very old screens and show films to the people on the occasion of different festivals whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian. These screenings were big hits and people especially women and children waited for them even though they were very bad technically and there were several breaks during the screening and the screening sometimes depended on the moods of the men who screened the films, most of them were drunk during these screenings

And the people at times even broke into impromptu dances and fights according to the scenes in the film being shown. There were even inter-village fights whenever people from other villages walked in to watch what were "our films" and not "their films"

My mother who was popular all over the village as "Mary Aunty" was very conscious about not being seen at the shows and it seemed as if she had vowed that she would take her sons to the theatres wherever they were screened in Bombay to see the films in their full and original splendor and whatever the price you would have to pay for it. And then begin a long ritual of watching some of the best Hindi and English films in different theaters of Bombay, from Andheri to Bandra right upto Churchgate, VT and Colaba. These visits to theaters used to be day-long events for which my mother used to prepare days in advance. There were special cloth made for the occasion. We were taken to the theaters in a taxi. If the tickets were not available in the current booking, Mary Ali, my mother would not accept defeat but buy tickets in the black market at double or more the price of the original. It would be best ice cream in the largest caps during the interval and Mary Ali would time the shows in such a way that we could have the best biryani in George Restaurant in Flora Fountain, Lucky Restaurant outside Bandra station or Moti Mahal outside Andheri Station, but ice cream and biryani was a must doing it after every film Oh Maa!

It was some kind of an auspicious start for me with my mother after seeing some films in school when she decided to take me and my brothers to see "Mughal-e-Azam" at the Neptune Theater in Bandra. It was the first day of the release and I still remember how there were people right up to the Bandra station with all of them wanting to see the film and I heard from my mother that people had even come from Pakistan to see the film. My mother like always refused to give up and made her way to the theater with us following her there was a huge board with screamed "Houseful" but she bought four tickets for 20 rupees (in 1960) and we watched the film in a state of high excitement with the entire audience going crazy. The dialogues were too difficult for both my mother and us to understand but they were good to listen to. It was the performance of all the actors especially Dilip Kumar and Madhubala which caught the attention of my mother and she told us about what she felt for the performances

She also told me that the song "Pyar Kiya to Darna Kya" was picturized at the K Asif Studio close to our house. The crowd was still the same when we came out and we celebrated "Mughal-e-Azam" with Mughlai biryani at Moti Mahal. It was the beginning of our pilgrimage to Bandra to see films. We watched English films like "Samson and Delilah", "Battle of Villa Florita" (which we found very boring as there was no battle in it till the very end) "Spartacus" (we thoroughly enjoyed it because of all the action) at the New Talkies which only showed Hollywood films those days

Our next big outing was "Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai", a film made by Raj Kapoor who was also the hero but was a film directed by his cinematographer Radhu Karmakar, I came to know years later. It was running at the Akash theater in Kurla near my school. There were separate queues for men and women. My mother asked me to stand in the queue for women and when I got the tickets (sixty naya paisa each ticket) she bought me an ice cream on the spot. I heard the entire audience calling out the name of Lata Mangeshkar and exclaiming, "wah Lata wah" when she sang the song "O Basanti Pawan Pagal Na Ra Je Na Jaa". Little did I know that it was to be the beginning of my worship of a deity called Lata Mangeshkar. The other discovery I made during watching the film was how bad a man could be when I saw an actor called Pran as the villain, Raaka. The next day when I went to school I was surprised when my teacher who taught me English told me the whole class that I reminded him so much of Pran the villain

It was back to Dilip Kumar who had become a favorite of my mother after "Mughal-e-Azam". This time she had taken some of her neighbors to watch "Ganga Jamuna" at the Usha Talkies in Andheri. They all enjoyed the film and the performance of the Dilip Kumar, especially the game of kabaddi was the climax in which Dilip Kumar dies. I was twelve at the time

and was surprised when those who saw the film with me start an argument over why Dilip Kumar in the film did not have a father and how my mother told them that it could not find all the answers to all these stupid questions in a film

Our pilgrimage then headed towards South Bombay and within a short time we had seen historical films like "The Ten Commandments", "King of Kings", "Ben Hur", and the musical classic "Sound of Music"

I have seen more than fifteen of the best films with my mother between 1960 and 1964 which was an unexpected record for me. Or was my mother and a hurry to give me all the experiences she would give me as soon as she could?

The last two films we saw together were Dev Anand's "Tere Ghar Ke Samne" and Rajshri's "Dosti". I don't know why she expressed her desire to see "Mother India", a film she should have seen and all mothers should see because it is the ultimate tribute to paid to a mother

My mother was never the same again and so was I. She went to sleep one night on November 29, 1965 after telling me not to wake her up under any circumstances and never woke up. It is a mystery I am living with the last 5 1/2 decades

And how I wish my "Maa" was around today when I, her favourite son have made whatever name I have in this world of cinema she introduced me to when I was a little boy!

II. PIECES OF A SON'S HEART

OH MAA, I HAVE BEEN THROWN AROUND AND TOSSED ABOUT LIKE AN UNWANTED OBJECT
IT IS GROWING MORE AND MORE PAINFUL LIVING WITH THIS LIFE
TELL ME, OH MAA HOW LONG WILL I HAVE TO LIVE LIFE LIKE THIS
I AM STILL TRYING TO LIVE BECAUSE YOU GAVE ME THIS LIFE TO ME
THEY SAY GOD CREATED ME
I ONLY KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY CREATOR
I WILL LIVE AS LONG AS YOUR LOVE LIVES IN ME
OR, LIFE HAS LOST ALL DIRECTIONS AND MEANING FOR ME
I NEED YOUR LOVE TO KEEP ME ALIVE IN THIS DANGEROUS WORLD, OH MAA,
COME IN LEAVE ME IN THE RIGHT WAY, YOUR WAY
OR, LET ME HAVE LIVED

*KABHEE MEREE BHEE EK DUNIYA THEE
CHHOTA HEE SAHEE MERA BHEE YAH GHAR THA
JO MEREE MAAN NE APANE HAATHON SE BANAAYA SANWAARA THA
US GHAR MEIN KUCHH BHEE NAHIN THA
LEKIN MEREE MAAN THEE VAH KYA KAM THA
DOPAHAR BHEE SHAAM BHEE RAAT BHEE
VAH MEREE ZAMEEN BHEE THEE CHHAT BHEE THEE, MERA SAAYA BHEE THEE, USAKE BINA MAIN KYA THA

MERA BAAP BHEE THA JO 7 SAAL KEE UMR TAK MUJHE GOAD MEIN UTHA KAR GAANV MEIN GHUMAAYA KARATA THA
SCHOOL BHEE LE JAAYA KARATA THA AUR GIRAJAAGHAR BHEE LE JAAYA KARATA THA
PHIR EK DIN BIJALEE ZOR SE KADAKEE TOOFAAN UTHA AUR MEREE MAAN RONE LAGEE NA JAANE KYON

LOGON NE MUJHASE KAHA TERA BAAP MAR GAYA AUR MAIN KAEE GHANTON KE BAAD RONE LAGA, NA JAANE

KYON

MERA BAAP MUSALAMAAN THA MEREE MAAN ISAAEE THEE
KUCHH LOGON MEIN BHAAREE LADAEE HUEE
AUR AAKHIR MERE BAAP KO JOHN NAAM DIYA GAYA AUR EESAEE KABRISTAAN MEIN DAPHANAAYA GAYA

UNAKA KAFAN 3 GHANTE TAK BHARE HUE PAANEE MEIN TAIRATA RAHA
AUR MUJHE SAMAJH MEIN NAHIN AAYA KI MAIN HANSOO YA ROOM MEIN ABHEE 7 SAAL KA THA ...

MEREE MAAN NE EK LAMBEE JANG SHURU KAR DEE AUR MUJHE AUR MERE DO BHAIYON KEE BADEE ACHCHHEE PARAVARISH KI KHUD KO KHUD TAKALEEF MEIN DAAL KAR
AUR PHIR EK BAAR BIJALEE GIREE BERAHAM HO GAEE AUR RAAT BHAYAANAK HO GAEE
AUR MEREE MAAN JANG HAAR GAEE AUR APANEE AANKHON MOOND LEEN MUJHASE AUR MEREE DUNIYA SE AUR MEREE LAMBEE JANG SHUROO HO GAEE JO AAJ 55 SAALON KE BAAD BHEE JAAREE HAI

MERE BHAEE LOG APANE APANE BAAREE KHELAKAR CHALE GAYE KUCHH BAHANEN JO MAINNE BANAEE VAH MERE SAATH KHEL KAR CHALEE GAYEE
MAINNE BAHUT PYAAR KIYAA AUR HAR BAAR PYAAR MEIN MAAT KHAEE LEKIN PYAAR KARANA CHHODA NAHIN AUR AB JAB MAIN 70 KA HO GAYA HOON MAIN SABASE ZYAADA PYAAR KAR RAHA HOON
MAINNE KAEE GHAR BADALE, MAIN AAVAARA BAADAL KE JAISE JIYA HOON MAINNE KABHEE ZAMAANE KE RIVAAJON AUR NIYAMON SE ZINDAGI NAHEEN JEE HAI. MAIN AISAA HEE THAA, AISAA HEE HOON, AISAA HEE RAHOONGAA

AB MAIN KYAA BADALOONGAA, KISKE LIYE BADALOONAGAA AUR KYON BADALOONGAA

I KNEW THE FUTILTY OF LIFE AFTER YOU HAD LEFT THIS WORLD SO MANY YEAR AGO
AND I WONDERED I HAVE BEEN LIVING ALL THESE YEARS

WITHOUT YOU

III. LESSONS MY MAA TAUGHT ME FOR LIFE

She was absolutely illiterate. She was not a philosopher, she was not a teacher, she was not a guide, she was one of those who gave sermons about how to live life, she didn't make any efforts to tell me what to do and what not to do, but the little things she kept telling me from time to time and made me do whenever she felt I was going wrong are lessons I will never dare to forget as long as I live...

I was five and in my first standard in school and a friend had beaten me up for no fault of mine and when she saw me with my hand bleeding, she took me to school and made me point out the boy who had beaten me and asked me to beat up the boy and I was not willing to to do it because I was scared and she said,

> **"If you keep tolerating people who harm you for no fault of yours, you will keep being harmed and humiliated by people".**

She was not satisfied till I gave that boy at least one slap and we returned home to a very good lunch she had prepared, which was her way of showing her happiness or her victory over what she thought was wrong.

She was not a very religious woman, but she believed in what was right and what was wrong. She also believed in Jesus Christ and his teachings and wanted her children to go to Church every Sunday. One Sunday, when I refused to get out of my bed to go to Church, I don't know how she brought a live snake and placed under my bed and woke me up and said,

> **" Look, the devil himself has come to meet you because you have made him happy by breaking the commandments of Jesus."**

She had taught me the importance of going to Church in a much better way than all the priests and teachers who were trying to teach me the same thing for months together.

She was forced by circumstances, very hard to make a living for herself and especially for her sons and it was observing her that made me love how working hard was important if one has to make it in life. There were times when she worked twenty hours a day and under the most gruelling conditions. I have never seen a woman working as hard as my Maa for half a century. There may be other mothers who have or are working

harder, but my heart knows how very hard my mother worked and slogged before fire to draw out those drops of alcohol that have us our source of livelihood. It was this sitting before fires for hours that perhaps killed her, I think now when I look back at her life.

She loved her family and could not see them being insulted or treated badly in anyway. And if anyone of them were ill treated, she had the courage to go into the houses of those people and give them the punishment they deserved and whatever action she took, she did it all by herself.

She was the first genuine social worker I knew. She had helped widows in finding jobs which they could do without making any compromise and she saw to it that they got their salaries on time . She also made it a point to see that theri children were put in the best schools in the area and she kept a track of how the children were progressing in their school. I sometimes wonder how this uneducated woman who was my Maa could be so interested in getting others educated when she herself was uneducated. But, she showed how she took education seriously when she got me and my younger brother admitted in the best convent school even though she had to sleep outside the school for a night to assure herself that her sons would get admission. She was cooking in her kitchen one evening and I was studying outside and used to be very happy when I used to study and that evening she told me something that shook me up. She said,

> **"Son, you may be the richest man in the world, you may have all the comforts and luxury, you may even be the king of the world, but if you are not educated then you are nothing, but one big zero. So, please keep studying and always be the best".**

A woman who had never been to school saying so much about the importance of being educated! I still can't believe it.

She had police cases against her for distilling illicit liquor, but she was never scared. She fought her cases all by herself and was successful in proving she did whatever she did to give her children a good education and a good life and a comfortable life. The police and the lawyers at the Andheri Magistrate's court looked at her with respect and she never travelled in a police van when she was arrested, but always travelled in a taxi to reach the police station or the court.

She loved her dogs and gave them the kind of lives human beings would have envied. Prince, was like her security guard and was with her till the end. On the day she died, he cried all day and night and walked in her funeral with all the people from the village and when she was finally being buried, Prince jumps into her grave and had to be pulled out by six strong

men and life was never the same for Prince again. He walked out of our house one morning with tears in his eyes and never returned again.

It is 57 years now since my mother left me alone in this world about which I still know very little and there is hardly a minute or a moment when I don't remember her. How can I not remember a mother who was not just a mother but a challenge to God because she could do what sometimes or several times even God couldn't do, at least for me.

I don't care whether there is re-birth or not, but I would like to see my mother reborn. So what she is not re- born for me, but I hope, wish and pray that she will be a mother again to some son like me in the time to come. A Mary Ali must be born again if the world has to live again in the true sense.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ali Peter John has had several problems with his name. He does not have a ration card, nor does he have a passport, all because of his odd-sounding name. He is an M. A. in English literature from the Bombay University, but he believes that he has learnt more in the University of Abbas than he has learnt at the university.

He was writing for India's prominent film magazine *Screen* for forty-eight long years and his column, *Ali's Notes*, has been accepted as a landmark by the film industry and readers who has been following him. He has written in almost all the newspapers and magazines of India on a variety of subjects about films. He has published twenty books during the last twenty years in his own way. The most prominent book according to him is his autobiography, Life-Bits and Pieces, which had its cover designed by the renowned painter M. F. Husain, the autobiography has also been translated in various languages. His circle of friends includes all the legends and down to .

He has been living his own simple life without expecting anything from life. He is now writing for a leading Hindi film magazine Mayapuri and at 71, he writes at least two articles every day. He hopes to write till he can no longer write.

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